

# CHIEF CORNPLANTER

PENNSYLVANIA'S one surviving Indian community lived until 1964 on the Cornplanter Tract in Warren County, northwest Pennsylvania. In that year the newly constructed Kinzua Dam was shut, flooding the Allegheny Reservoir and submerging the community's physical remains.

The Cornplanter Tract was not an Indian reservation. It was a grant of land made in 1791 to Cornplanter, a chief of the Seneca nation, and to his heirs by the Pennsylvania General Assembly. Through this gift, the government of Pennsylvania expressed its gratitude to Cornplanter for his Indian diplomacy in the early years of American independence.

Cornplanter's people knew him as Kaintwakon, meaning "by what one plants." The white people knew him also as John Abeel (rendered also as Obail) and by other names. He was born to his Seneca Indian mother about 1750 at Ganawagus, near Avon, New York. The Wolf Clan to which she belonged was a ranking Indian family. Among its members were several prominent Indian leaders, Kiasutha, Handsome Lake, Red Jacket, and Governor Blacksnake, all principals in the drama of Indian-white relations which spanned the remainder of the century after 1755. Ultimately, this drama would determine whether this country, especially that part west of the Allegheny Mountains, would be French or English, European or Indian.

About 1784, Cornplanter assumed—rather, had

thrust upon him—his principal's role. This role derived from his leading position among the Iroquois of the upper Allegheny and Genesee rivers, a position which he had gradually assumed from his maternal uncle, Kiasutha. Cornplanter was only half Indian. His father was John Abeel, of a prominent Albany Dutch family. Abeel had gone into the Indian country in western New

York to trade as early, possibly, as 1744—he was 22 that year—and he would spend the rest of his active life as a trader there. His special passport among hostile Indians was his ability as a gunsmith. French, Dutch, or British saw to it that the Indians had plenty of arms, and the Indians welcomed white men who could repair them.

Cornplanter was the child of a temporary union, common then between whites and Indians. In Iroquois society the "nationality" of the mother determined that of her children. Cornplanter was reared as an Indian and an

Indian he remained. It is hard to believe that one who had so many contacts with whites never spoke their language, but it apparently is true.

At some time in the dim past the New York Iroquois, anxious to end warfare and maintain the peace, had organized themselves into a unique confederation known to our history as the League of the Iroquois. Easternmost of the Iroquois were the Mohawks, on the river of that name; west of them were the Oneidas, the Onondagas, and the Cayugas, each "nation" asso-



McKenney and Hall, *Indian Tribes of North America*

*Chief Cornplanter, 1796, by F. Bartoli.*



*Red Jacket, in opposition to Cornplanter, urged that the Iroquois resist American encroachment.*

ciated with a lake now named for it. Farthest west were the Senecas. These original League members were joined by the Tuscaroras, who began to move into Oneida country from the South about 1720. The Tuscaroras were admitted to "associate membership," so that thereafter the League of Five Nations was often called the Six Nations.

Most numerous and powerful of all the league members were the westernmost, the Senecas. The Senecas had divided really into two peoples, those in the Seneca Lake region and those on the Genesee and upper Allegheny rivers. Cornplanter's family belonged to the latter group, called the Chenussio people. They became increasingly associated with the British and Americans at Pittsburgh. Kiasutha, Cornplanter's maternal uncle, was the local chief for the League on the Allegheny and upper Ohio rivers. At the outset of the American Revolution, British and Americans had officially urged these Indians to remain neutral. The quarrel, they stated publicly, was between a white father over the water and his sons over here and was no concern of the Indians. The Indians were anxious to believe this, but each side was just as anxious, privately, to win their assistance. At last, the

British made an open appeal to the Iroquois to declare war against the Americans, using bribes of rum and goods so generous that the occasion was remembered for years. The two representatives of the Chenussio Senecas, Kiasutha, who was partial to the Americans, whom he knew at Pittsburgh, and Cornplanter, were the last to hold out for neutrality. They acquiesced, however, in the majority decision made at Oswego, July, 1777, and went off with the rest to attack the American Fort Stanwix at Rome, New York. Accompanied by his nephew Governor Blacksnake, Cornplanter fought as a "captain" of Indians through the entire war, mostly in the New York theater. A majority of historical accounts declare that Cornplanter was frequently the leader in bloody raids on the Pennsylvania frontier.

Cornplanter emerged from the Revolution a principal war chief of the Senecas. After the treaty of peace between Great Britain and the United States, he learned that the British, despite their promises, had neglected the interests of their Indian allies and in effect had abandoned them to the former colonists. From that time on he cast his lot with the United States, believing that his people's wisest course lay in cooperating with the new nation and making thereby the best possible terms with it. He helped the whites because he regarded this as the only way to help the Indians.

Once the struggle with Britain was concluded, hardy pioneers began to push to the west and establish a new frontier. Especially attractive were the rich lands of the Genesee country in New York and the adjoining part of northwest Pennsylvania; large land companies had plans for settlement. These had been the prized hunting grounds of the Six Nations and their sylvan home for generation upon generation. The once powerful confederacy had yet to feel any weakening of its power, and its chieftains were still inclined to view themselves as lords of the wilderness.

History records that the man who faced this issue in the most statesmanlike way was Cornplanter, chief of the Senecas. Less farsighted leaders among his people, such as Red Jacket,

his kinsman, sought to lead them into a policy of senseless and stubborn opposition, which could have had but one outcome—the annihilation of the Iroquois. Cornplanter foresaw this and envisioned another solution—the use of peaceful bargaining in an effort to save his people, and to preserve for them a small portion of the lands over which they once held complete dominion. Such a policy was not an easy one to adopt, for the whites were grasping and unappreciative, and the authorities at New York and Philadelphia could not always enforce treaties with the Indians. It was a policy of subservience and was pursued at a terrible cost in pride and self-respect, but Cornplanter saw that it was the only policy which could preserve the remnants of the Six Nations from extinction.

Thus it is that the history of Indian relations during the years from 1784 to the turn of the century is filled with the record of the influence of Chief Cornplanter, son of a white trader and a highborn Seneca woman. It was the hand of this powerful war chief of the Senecas, now using the arts of peace, which was so much in evidence behind the scenes in concluding the treaties of Fort Stanwix in 1784 and Fort Harmar in 1789. These provided a settlement of land problems and Indian relations. The possibility of trouble remained, however. During 1790 and 1791, Cornplanter earned the gratitude of Pennsylvania by his heroic effort to check the development of a threatening alliance between eastern and Ohio Indians.

The Indians' hostility was not without cause. In 1790, Cornplanter visited Philadelphia to protest white inroads upon Iroquois lands. In his frustration, he characterized President Washington as a "town destroyer," recalling the disastrous effects of the Sullivan expedition upon his people during the Revolution. He pleaded for his people: "Where is the land which our children, and their children after them, are to lie down upon?" they asked. The Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania and Governor Thomas Mifflin listened to Cornplanter's plea and assured him that Indians and their lands would be protected.

The following year President Washington sent

Cornplanter to cultivate peace and friendship with the Indians of Ohio and Michigan. Conferences with them on the Ohio and at Painted Post in New York ended in failure. Major General Anthony Wayne's bloody defeat of the Indians in the Battle of Fallen Timbers near Toledo, Ohio, August, 1794, finally convinced the western tribes to end their resistance. Cornplanter, however, was successful in keeping the Iroquois from joining the rebels.

On his numerous visits to New York, Albany, and Philadelphia, he discussed religion and education with those who were concerned about his people. During his long stay in Philadelphia in the winter of 1790, he attended Quaker meetings with some regularity. The following year he asked the Quakers to accept his oldest son Henry and two other boys for schooling in Philadelphia, to which they agreed. He also asked the Society of Friends for a Seneca mission:

We wish our children to be taught the same principles by which your fathers were guided. Brothers! We have too little wisdom among us, and we cannot teach our children what we see their situation requires them to know. We wish them to be taught to read and write, and such other things as you teach your children, especially the love of peace.



*A home on the Cornplanter Tract.*



*Cornplanters and Senecas gathered at the Cornplanter tract on August 24, 1940, to adopt Governor Arthur H. James of Pennsylvania as a "blood brother" of the Senecas. More than 3,000 visitors attended the traditional ceremonies.*

In 1798 the Quakers accepted Cornplanter's invitation to teach his people. He encouraged schools and missions. The Quakers made no attempt to convert, but instead devoted themselves to morals, education, and improved agricultural techniques. With their guidance, his community became a model, with roads, good houses, fences, plowed fields, and more cattle than could well be wintered. Cornplanter strongly opposed liquor and he was supported in this by his half-brother Handsome Lake, who in 1799 became a religious reformer and a prophet to the Iroquois people. To an extent, the Quakers complemented and influenced Handsome Lake's "new religion."

After 1812, however, Cornplanter became disillusioned with the Americans. Their increasingly shabby treatment of his people confirmed for him the earlier warning of Handsome Lake that Indian salvation demanded a turning away from white ways and a return to the best of

Indian tradition. In remorse over his part in assimilating his people to the culture of the white man, Cornplanter burned his military uniform, broke his sword, and destroyed his medals; he closed the schools and dismissed the missionaries. Yet, despite this, he retained his affection for the Quakers, who now settled at Tunesassa, near the Allegany Reservation in New York state. He died at home on the Cornplanter Tract on February 18, 1836.

Cornplanter's descendants and other Indians continued to live on the tract. The community had its own school and its Presbyterian Church. Eventually, however, the population dwindled as residents moved to the adjacent, larger, and related Allegany Reservation of New York. Residence became largely seasonal, and in late 1964 the last inhabitant left, permitting Kinzua Dam to be closed and the reservoir flooded. The Cornplanter Indians would no longer call Pennsylvania their home.